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Empowered by Education and Vision

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Empowered by Education and Vision

Larry Echo Hawk

It is with heartfelt appreciation that I stand before you, having been invited to be the commencement speaker for the class of 1994. I want to first express the high emotions that I have today in coming back to Brigham Young University. There are six Echo Hawk children that were born to my parents, and four of us received our education here at BYU. It is here that I find many friends, and, most important, the greatest mentors in my life were the people I became associated with when I had the opportunity to obtain my education and play football at Brigham Young University.

I want to extend my congratulations to all the members of the class of 1994. Your graduation from law school is one of the very highest achievements that you will have in life, and we honor you today. But I also want to say a word of congratulations to the grandparents, parents, family members, and friends who have supported you graduates through the very challenging years of law school. I know there are many people here today who feel a great sense of pride because of your achievements. Perhaps you are the first generation in your family to receive this high education, and we all join today in commemorating your efforts and congratulating you.

I have wondered why I was invited to be the graduation speaker, because, as you know, I'm a politician. Politicians are not necessarily held in high esteem today. I remember when I first ran for the office of attorney general in Idaho. One of the political analysts stated very early in my campaign that "Larry Echo Hawk starts with three strikes against him: he's a Mormon, an Indian, and a Democrat."

To add to that, I recall one day when I was riding in an elevator in a high-rise building in Boise. I had been thinking about the challenge that my campaign managers had been putting to me. I was raised among quiet people. I am known as a quiet, reserved, serious individual, and they kept

saying, “You need to reach out, smile, greet people, and be more of an extrovert.”

So one day as I was in the elevator, the elevator stopped, the doors opened, three women walked in, and the doors closed. The light went on in my head. I thought, “This is my captive audience.” So I built up my courage, and I said, “I’m Larry Echo Hawk. I’m running for the office of the attorney general.” I should have stopped right there, but instead I said, “I bet you didn’t realize when you woke up this morning that you would be riding in an elevator with a politician running for a statewide office.”

And I was pretty proud of myself until one of the women shot back, “Well, unfortunately, my whole day has been going that way.”

In spite of those challenges, I have had the opportunity to serve as the state attorney general in Idaho. My thoughts today go back to a time when I was getting my undergraduate degree here at Brigham Young University and my brother John was receiving his law degree at another university. BYU did not have a law school in those days. But I remember he pulled me aside as my older brother and gave me some advice. He told me to pursue an education in the law: it would be the power to change. And I took that to mean that law would be the power to change from some humble beginnings in life to a better quality of life. But over the years I came to understand that what he was really talking about was not only the power to change yourself but also the power to change the world for others.

I’ve had some wonderful experiences as a state attorney general. In January 1991 I stood on the steps of the state capitol building in Boise, placed a hand on the Bible, raised the other to the square, and took the oath of office as Idaho’s 30th attorney general. I was the first American Indian in United States history to serve in any statewide executive office. That day my heart was full with appreciation. Just days later I stood in the rotunda of that same capitol building and delivered the keynote address for Idaho’s first-ever Martin Luther King human rights day. Two months later I stood in the United States Supreme Court preparing for argument, which would ultimately be one of the great professional experiences of my life.

I remember I was trying to get rid of the butterflies that day when counsel in the next case walked up to me—he was a person I knew well—and said, “Is this your first case?”

I responded to Rex Lee, “Yes, it is.” Then I asked him, “How many have you argued?”

And he said, nonchalantly, “Fifty-four.”

That kind of intimidated me.

But my memories also go back to the opportunity I had as a newly elected attorney general to meet the United States president in person—a rare opportunity for anyone. Regardless of whether you identify yourself as a Republican or a Democrat, to be in the presence of a United States

president is something very special. And I had that opportunity the second year I was in office.

Last year I was given a new opportunity because there was a new United States president. I remember there was great anticipation among the ranks of the 50 state attorneys general as we gathered in Washington, D.C., to go to the White House and meet President Bill Clinton. But the next day we got the news that our appointment had been canceled because the president was at the bedside of Hillary Clinton's father, who was gravely ill. We went on to meet the vice president, Al Gore, and the United States attorney general, Janet Reno.

I was in my hotel room that night when the phone rang at 11:30 p.m., and I answered. A voice said, "Would you like to go jogging with the president in the morning? He has just returned from Little Rock." I thought it was a joke. But the next morning I found myself standing in the diplomatic reception room with two other state attorneys general—one from Ohio and one from Vermont. Pretty soon the president joined us, and we had a brief conversation.

Then the Secret Service walked through to take a look at us, and I think there was a look of concern. An agent said, "Well, I hope you guys are in shape, because the president ran four miles the day before in Little Rock, each mile in under eight minutes." That may not sound like much to you young graduates, but wait until you're 46 years old.

As we started out the back of the White House, I thought we were going to start jogging immediately, but there was a limousine with the doors open—a part of a motorcade—and the president told us to get in. I got in the backseat in the middle, the doors closed, and we started to move. I looked over, and the president of the United States was sitting right next to me, and there I was in my jogging clothes. It was a very strange feeling.

We went just a short way from the White House by the Washington Monument. The press was there shouting out questions, and then we started jogging up toward the Capitol building. When you see the president running on TV, he looks kind of slow, and I was glad, because he was slow. We started at a conversational pace and went about a mile and a half up near the Capitol. Then we turned around and headed back toward the White House and had good conversation for a while. Then the president started to pick up the pace, and the conversation started to dissipate. He kept picking up the pace, and then all of a sudden there went Ohio—it was a golden opportunity to jog with the president, but he was out of shape. So we went a little further, and the president started to pick up the pace a little more. Then all of a sudden there went Vermont. And I was feeling very fortunate at that time. I'm a marathon runner, so I figured I would be okay. The president kept picking up the pace, and—wouldn't you know it—about 20 yards before the White House gate I got a charley horse and

had to drop back, so the president won. Well, now you know why I'm state attorney general. I'm not stupid.

The reason I mention that story is to make a point about what happened afterward. As soon as Ohio and Vermont straggled in, we went into the Oval Office and spent about 45 minutes with the president sitting behind his desk talking about articles there that were of historic interest. He came to a point when he mentioned the desk that he had brought in when he was elected president, and he said that it was the desk of John F. Kennedy. When he said that, I noticed a hesitation and a little crack in his voice, and I could see there was some emotion. At that moment a picture came into my mind of a 17-year-old boy shaking the hand of President John F. Kennedy. Clinton was a student leader, and, as part of Boys Nation, he met President Kennedy.

As I stood there, right in front of that desk in the Oval Office, the thought "Who is he?" came into my mind—not in terms of position or politics but in terms of his roots. Clinton was born in a small town. He never knew his natural father because his father was killed before he was born. His mother didn't even raise him in those early years—his grandparents did. At best, you would describe him then as lower middle class. But there he was, president of the United States, empowered by vision and empowered by education. And whether you are a Republican or a Democrat, that principle exemplifies what we all believe in: the promise of America—the American dream.

And then I had a second thought: "What am I doing here?" Echo Hawk was the name given to my great-grandfather, a Pawnee Indian. He didn't speak English, and he lived in what is now the state of Nebraska in the mid-1800s. Among the Pawnee at that time, people did not have a first and a last name, but they acquired a name because of something about them. Among the Pawnee, the hawk is a symbol of a warrior, and my great-grandfather was known for his bravery. He was also known for being a quiet man. He never spoke of his own accomplishments. But others did. And as they did, it was like an echo in the village—an echo from one side of the village to the other as they talked about his deeds. This is how he got his name from the elders. Echo Hawk: the hawk whose deeds are echoed.

I never knew my great-grandfather, but I am proud of that heritage. Yet there is pain when I think about what he went through, because at one time the Pawnee people occupied a land that, under the United States laws, was recognized as their homeland. In the winter of 1874 Echo Hawk was marched away from his home to the Oklahoma Indian Territory. No longer could he visit his ancestral gravesites. No longer could he seek visions upon the high grassy plains of his homelands. No longer would he be able to pursue the great herds. And, most painfully, when he was relocated into the Oklahoma Indian Territory, the Pawnee people had gone from more than 25,000 people to fewer than 750.

I'm sure I cannot fully comprehend the challenges he faced, but out of that pain was born promise—the promise of America. I knew that promise probably more than at any other time on election night in 1990 in the state of Idaho when I learned that I would have the opportunity to be Idaho's 30th attorney general. I was asked by the news media to make a statement, and I remember kneeling in a hotel room, with my youngest child asleep in the bed, thinking about what I would say. I walked out into another hotel room to face the television cameras and the news reporters with my father, the grandson of Echo Hawk, by my side. My thoughts went back to words of inspiration that I heard when I was 15 years old. A black civil rights leader stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and made an impassioned plea for peace and fairness and justice and equality. That night in Pocatello, Idaho, I spoke from memory those words:

"I . . . have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.' . . .

"I have a dream that my . . . children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." [Martin Luther King Jr., "I Have a Dream," speech at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C., 28 August 1963]

I believe in America. I believe in the spirit of America. I believe that America must stand as a land of opportunity for all, regardless of race, religion, gender, physical disability, ethnic heritage, or economic status. I believe very strongly in that promise. But I stand before you today to tell you that as long as we have people in our communities and across this nation who are hungry and homeless, the promise of America is unfulfilled. As long as our youth struggle with substance abuse and are being beckoned to be participants of gangs and victims of drive-by shootings and violence, the promise of America is unfulfilled. As long as we have young people who don't dream about their potential and about what education can do in their lives, and they set their sights low, then the pain goes on and the promise of America is unfulfilled.

Only six weeks ago I walked down the center lane of a highway in a city in rural Idaho on a very cold, overcast, dark winter day, and before me was a sight I will never forget. Cars were lined up along the highway bumper to bumper, stretching nearly a mile; police cars' overhead lights flashed; and officers in uniform stood next to those cars. It was a tragic and sorrowful day. I walked nearly a mile to the graveside service for the father of four small children—a police officer gunned down by a 14-year-old. It was an emotional experience, and I remember walking up after the graveside service to the wife and those small children. I took her hand and said, "I'm Larry Echo Hawk, attorney general of the state of Idaho, and, on

behalf of the people of my state, I express my deepest sympathy and sorrow for the loss you have suffered.” She broke down weeping.

I gave her a hug, and after she began to gain her composure, she whispered in my ear with a broken voice, “Please, Mr. Echo Hawk, do all you can to make sure this does not happen to someone else.” That experience has haunted me. I have felt the burden of that moment, but I welcome the responsibility.

My message to you graduates today is to turn your hearts to the next generation—to your children. You are surrounded today by proud parents and grandparents who made sacrifices years ago. You represent today their dreams and aspirations. Now, today, as I speak to you, I ask you to think about your children and your grandchildren and to ask yourself, what kind of world will they live in? You take upon yourself that responsibility and that burden that I speak of today because you are problem solvers and you are the hope of a nation because you are empowered with education. But it takes more: It takes a strong commitment. It takes a vision about what you can do. It requires character.

I have spoken very frankly today of the challenges that face our communities and America. I believe that my home state is one of the last of the best places in America to live and to raise a family. But of the communities that you will go into, it will be your challenge to not only preserve those places but to reclaim them in many areas as places to live, to prosper, and to raise a good family. I have spoken of some of the serious challenges that we face. I think it’s time for frank talk.

But I leave with you some inspirational words I heard in my youth that I hope will empower you, because I am where I am today because of the great promise of this country. In my youth I heard the words spoken by Robert F. Kennedy when he said, “Some men see things as they are and say, why; I dream things that never were and say, why not?” (paraphrasing George Bernard Shaw, “In the Beginning,” Part 1, *Back to Methuselah* [1921], act 1).

Why not? Each of you has to ask yourself and your community, why not bring forth the promise of America?

This J. Reuben Clark Law School convocation address was given at the Provo Tabernacle on April 22, 1994.

Larry Echo Hawk received his JD from the University of Utah in 1973. He was elected Idaho state attorney general 1990–1994, served as a law professor at J. Reuben Clark Law School 1995–2009, and served as assistant secretary for Indian Affairs in the U.S. Department of the Interior in Washington, D.C., 2009–2012. Recipient of the J. Reuben Clark Law Society Distinguished Service Award in 2013, he is currently a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy.